

What is the Bible?

The Bible is a collection of writings reflecting different genres, time periods, authors, and even editors. Its various books and letters span hundreds of years at least - thousands if we include the Torah, or the first five books of the Bible. Because it is a collection, many scholars refer to the book you may be holding in your hands as "the Bible," but the texts themselves as "Scripture" or sacred writings.

More than anything else, the Bible is the the story of God. It is neither a modern science book nor a history book - at least not as history is typically understood today. German theologians have drawn a distinction between History (*Geschichte*) and Salvation History (*Giltesgeschichte*) to help differentiate between the sort of history found in Scripture and that which you might study in a contemporary textbook at school. From creation, to the rebellion of humanity, to the long process of redeeming creation, Scripture tells the story of a loving God intent upon dwelling in harmonious relationship with God's creation. It is HIS Story! The focus, from first to last, then, is upon God. Secondly, Scripture teaches us all that we need to know to "be saved" - or to be restored into right relationship with God, each other, ourselves, and creation. In the Church of the Nazarene we call this the Doctrine (or teaching) of Plenary Inspiration.

The Bible teaches that all Scripture is God-breathed or inspired (2 Timothy 3:16). What does this mean? First, it must be remembered that at the time it was written, "Scripture" referred to the Old Testament or the Hebrew Bible. This was a powerful reminder to Gentile Christians in particular, that the story of the God of Israel, with all of its strangeness is, indeed, the story that they were grafted into. Just as God spoke through Jesus, and was speaking through the Disciples, God had spoken through the great Prophets of Israel, and especially through Moses. Secondly, this means that Scripture is holy - it is how God has chosen to relay God's story, and our own story, to us. The Holy Spirit is alive in Scripture, causing the stories and teachings to come alive for us, drawing us into the living tradition of the people of God. Finally, we typically choose to apply this teaching to all of Scripture as well. All of the Canon (or the Bible as it was official decided upon by the early Church) is authoritative and inspired for teaching, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness. Notice the word dictation has not been used. Other than a few places in Scripture (the 10 Commandments and the letters to the churches found in the first few chapters of the book of Revelation) the Bible is said to be written, edited, and compiled via inspiration and not dictation. In other words, In Scripture, God works through human personalities to convey God's love to God's creation.

Just as God worked through the personalities of the writers, editors, and compilers of Scripture, God calls us to the task of interpreting Scripture. To interpret Scripture we depend upon the Holy Spirit, and bring our reason, experience, and our knowledge of tradition to bear upon what we read. The last bit is important, as it means we read within the community and context of the Church - God's faithful across time.

How to Read the Bible.

The best way to read the Bible is to . . . wait for it . . . read the Bible! That's right. Nothing compares with actually taking the time to read Scripture. Reading and re-reading it has been the source of most of Christian teaching since Paul's first letters. Before that, the reading of Scripture was central to the life of Israel. For example, after years of waywardness and struggle, King Josiah, found the Torah and had it read aloud to the people as a way of re-constituting their faith and re-framing their story. Christians are said to be "people of the book," as John Wesley liked to claim.

Beyond the simple admonition to read the Bible, it's worth noting the importance of reading it in community. Yes, you should read the Bible alone, devotionally, as often as possible. You should also, though, seek opportunities to read it aloud, with others. You should listen to the Bible as well, hearing it read by different and diverse voices. In this way, the beauty and diversity of Scripture comes to life as you read and then discuss.

Reading from start to finish is a great goal, but not always practical. Some choose yearly reading plans that chop up the reading of Scripture in easy-to-manage, but out-of-order plans. Different methods work for different people. One simple suggestion, though, is to be sure to read the context of whatever it is you are reading. Rather than simply reading a small passage of Matthew's Gospel and then moving on the next day to something from Jeremiah, therefore, I suggest you read the whole chapter from Matthew, or ideally the whole Gospel! Take time to situate yourself in the "world" of the author and of the text. Doing so allows the author's voice and intent to speak to you across the years.

Let's face it, Scripture can sometimes be confusing! Unfortunately, we often get things wrong by attempting to interpret one strange verse by dragging it out of context and using our own reason, opinions, or experiences to provide meaning to our confusion. Instead, understanding most passages is usually as simple as looking to its surrounding verses and passages. And of course, reading Scripture in its original language is always helpful for interpretation! In a few cases, strange verses need to be held up against the entire Bible in order to figure out what is going on. Examples: Eating meat sacrificed to Idols (1 Corinthians) and Jesus's admonition to his disciples to take a sword with them (Luke 22:36).



Levels of Context:

- **Surrounding Verses**
- **Surrounding Passages**
- **Whole Book**
- **All Of Scripture**

Finally, don't forget that we are Christians. We are Christ-followers. You are most likely reading Scripture because at some point in time someone told you about Jesus, and the Holy Spirit

used the living witness of your friend or family member to draw you towards Jesus. (That's what the Holy Spirit does, by the way, points us towards Jesus, who in turn points us to the Father.) This means that when in doubt, read the words of Jesus. Read and re-read the Gospel accounts. Pay special attention to sustained teachings such as the so-called "Sermon on the Mount" in Matthew 5-7 and the "Sermon on the Plain" in Luke 6:17-49. If you're confused about a particular teaching found in the writing of Paul, John, or Jeremiah, seek to balance out this teaching with the teachings of Jesus. This is another instance where reading together can be beneficial. Such study is complicated and difficult. Studying together in this way, though, can help to shed light on otherwise difficult teachings.

When reading the Bible, remember:

- It is the story of God.
- It tells us how we might be saved by this God.
- Read in community whenever possible.
- Pay attention to context:
 - Surrounding verses
 - Surrounding chapters
 - Whole Book
 - All of Scripture
 - What, if Anything, Does Jesus Say About This?